

# The Promise of Education

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If you listen beyond the “buzz” about class size reduction—the highest-impact law to hit California education in decades—you may hear, as I do, a deeper, more substantial sound. I hear in it as the voice of renewed hope for the return to what I call “the promise of education.”

Beyond the inspiring bursts of creativity on the part of school districts striving to achieve class size reduction, there is the unmistakable sense that, once again, education is important, even crucial. Complex federal issues such as immigration reform, for example, turn on such questions as whether illegal immigrants have the right to a public education. And so we come to see how interdependent our system of public education is.

Consider how often cultural anxiety translates into calls for educational reform.

**... people once defied kings so that their children could learn to think independently.**

The landmark education report of the 1980s was entitled “A Nation at Risk.” Today Professor Michael Rose of UCLA asserts that the public classroom is the nation’s most powerful place. “Classrooms are a collective public place in which America is created and re-created,” he asserts.

Consider the gravity of that thought. The system of public education we attempt to manage but can never control is vital to the continuing existence of a nation. “A society that defines itself as free and open is obligated to create and sustain the public space for education to occur across the broad full sweep of its citizenry,” Rose continues. “To imagine a vibrant democratic state, you must have a

deep belief in the majesty of common intelligence, in its distribution throughout the population, and in the resultant ability of the population to become participatory civic beings.”

Where did this idea come from?

Whenever I have a complex philosophical or political question, I turn to the same source for answers, for reason — for solace: the law. Last year, the California Legislature answered my inquiries with Assembly Bill 3086 (Olberg). This new law requires all high school pupils to read and be taught the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution including the Bill of Rights, “*The Federalist Papers*,” the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address, and George Washington’s farewell address.

Have you read them? I went back and read them all, and here’s what I found.

The first document bravely asserts: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and to institute a new government ... in such form as shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

When you think about it, these are

pretty dangerous ideas to be teaching every high school student in the state.

The Declaration planted the seeds of a lesson that still applies today. That is: don’t just sit back and blame someone else for your dissatisfaction, do something to change it. The other thing I learned from the Declaration is that the founders’ motivations were quite basic: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In these three ideas, I find the nucleus of our nation’s emphasis on education.

In Letter 51 of *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison echoed the Declaration’s spirit in its assertion that governments must reflect the will and nurture the aspirations of the people, but he also recognized, as he put it, that “if men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Madison wrote: “A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government. But experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.” Madison feared more than the oppression of rulers; he said we must also guard one part of society against injustice of the other part. How? “By comprehending in the society so many separate descriptions of citizens as will render an unjust combination of a majority of the whole very improbable.”

These words are 208 years old—but have you heard a better, more concise definition of diversity and its virtues? “Justice is the end of government,” Madison argued. “It is the end of a civil society.”

Today we still grapple with notions of justice and civil rights in a complex society. As H. L. Mencken said, “Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice.” What stings is grappling with the notion of justice when a community college instructor cites the First Amendment and academic freedom as his license to teach from *Hustler* and *Penthouse*, and the courts uphold his claim. What stings

is trying to understand the ever-shifting boundaries of discrimination, especially sexual harassment, among students who are 15 years old, 11 years old — even 6 years old.


Elsewhere I read: “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our property, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution summarized exactly what was to follow: freedom of religious exercise; freedom of speech; the right to peaceable assembly; and the guarantee that no state shall “deprive any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

Simple, simple words. Yet much of today’s law-making flows directly from these few phrases. Can we prohibit the student from wearing certain colors, or is this an abridgment of the right to free speech? Can a state Department of Education employee put Christian inscriptions on work documents and a computer program? Can a union president be restrained from attacking a school board’s initial bargaining proposal during the public’s right to comment, or is this an abridgment of the right to free speech?

The examples go on and on, and by their sheer volume we understand why some refer to the Constitution as a living document. That turns out to be especially true as regards education. The application of this centuries-old document to today’s issues can amaze us, confound us, frustrate us and anger us, but it does much to explain the dangers and delights of the free government about which we seek to educate our young. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote: “If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other, it is the principle of free thought—not free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom for the thought that we hate.”

At this point in my reading, I began to question whether the California Legis-






lature and the Governor really knew what they were doing in requiring all high school students to be taught these principles. What if they took these ideas to heart?

I continued to read. In his farewell address, George Washington worried for the future of the republic. For its security, he implored his successors to “promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened.”

Then I came to those most famous of famous opening words: “Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” With the “Emancipation Proclamation,” and its proclamation that as of January 1, 1863, “all persons held as slaves ... shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free,” I had completed the mandatory civics lesson.

But what did I learn? And, more important, what will we teach those high school students, and what will they learn?

If I am an example, they may realize that what happens in their classrooms places them as much at the center of this society and this democratic form of government as Madison, Washington — the rest were. They may learn that frightened people once defied kings so that their children could learn to think independently in a free society. They may even sense that they will create and recreate America in that classroom.

And school board members, administrators — teachers, should they read as I have, might realize that their jobs entail more than trying to give structure to the seeming chaos; more than coping with the endless bureaucracy and advice from experts who have never been in their shoes. They might realize that they are working to fulfill the promises of the founding fathers to accomplish the general diffusion of knowledge, to create an enlightened and participatory citizenry, and, ultimately, to arm their students with the ability to pursue and achieve happiness. This truly is the promise of education. 

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